

The Lord's Supper

grace church position papers

And when He had taken some bread and given thanks, He broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood."

- Luke 22:19-20

The Lord's Supper is an ordinance (public ceremony) instituted by Christ to serve as a continual remembrance of His saving death and as a means to draw us into fellowship and communion with Him. The Lord's Supper is celebrated by almost all of Christianity, yet there are many different interpretations of the ordinance. It has, at the same time, united and divided the Church.

We are aware that many people at Grace Church come from various backgrounds and may have differing views of the Lord's Supper. The doctrinal position held at Grace Church has been adopted after careful study and prayer. We believe it is important to answer any questions that may arise regarding our beliefs and how we arrived at such conclusions on this issue.

Some of the major questions that need to be answered concerning the Lord's Supper are:

1. What is the meaning of the Lord's Supper?
2. Who can participate in the Lord's Supper?
3. How often should the Lord's Supper be observed?
4. Who can administer the Lord's Supper?
5. What elements are used to celebrate the Lord's Supper?

Depending on the religious tradition you come from, you may have heard different answers for any or all of these questions; the Christian Church has been divided on this issue for many centuries. Hopefully the answers to these questions will provide you with a better understanding of how we view the Lord's Supper at Grace Church.

1. WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE LORD'S SUPPER?

There are many different views on the meaning of the Lord's Supper within orthodox Christianity. Listed below

are four of the most prominent views.

Catholic View

The bread and wine of the Lord's Supper actually become the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

This is the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, which takes the words of Christ in the Gospels literally. Each time the elements of the Lord's Supper are consecrated by a priest, a literal metaphysical change takes place. The substance of the bread and the wine are transformed into the literal body and blood of Christ.

When this "change" (transubstantiation) takes place, according to the Catholic Church, the bread and wine become the real body and blood of Jesus. Additionally, grace is imparted through the elements to those practicing Catholics participating in the ceremony. And finally, in each mass a real sacrifice takes place and Christ is sacrificed again and again on behalf of the participants. Only an ordained priest can actually consecrate the bread and wine. Unless an ordained priest follows a set formula the bread and wine are not changed.

Luther's View

The bread and the wine do not actually become the body and the blood of Christ, but the physical body of Christ is actually present in, with and under the bread and wine.

Martin Luther rejected the Roman Catholic concept of The Lord's Supper. He did not believe that the bread and wine were actually changed into the body and blood of Christ, but he believed that the body and blood were present in the elements (Consubstantiation).

He was convinced that the idea of a priest sacrificing Christ at the altar missed the point of Christ's one time death and sacrifice. Luther argued that it was the Word of God, not the sacrament itself, that is the source of spiritual life. However, he maintained that there had to be some type of literal understanding to the phrases "this is my body" and "this is my blood". He also saw the sacramental aspect of the Lord's Supper and saw it as

a means of imparting grace on the participants. While Luther saw great distinction between his view and the Roman Catholic view, to the modern person they appear similar.

Calvin's View

The body and blood of Christ is present in the bread and wine only in a figurative and symbolic sense.

The Reformed view of John Calvin and many other Reformers took yet another step away from the Roman Catholic view regarding the literal presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. Calvin suggested that the bread and wine did not change into the body and blood of Christ (the Catholic View), nor did they contain the body and blood of Christ (the Lutheran view). Rather, Calvin believed that there is the presence of Christ at the Lord's Supper, but it is spiritual and not physical.

The Reformed view of Calvin recognizes that Christ's institution of the Lord's Supper was done using figurative and symbolic language. However, the Reformed view still insists that the elements are a means of grace and that Christ is present in the Lord's Supper in a spiritual or even mystical way.

Zwingli's View

The Lord's Supper is commemoration of Christ's death.

Another early reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, is regarded as the author of this view. Zwingli, like Calvin, believed that the physical body of Jesus was in no way present in the elements of the Lord's Supper. However, his view was different from Calvin's, in that he saw the Lord's Supper as a commemoration of Christ's death. It is celebrated by the believer as an act of "remembrance" of Christ's death and his sacrifice. This view emphasizes that the Lord's Supper is a devotional act on the part of the believer.

Grace Church's Position

These are the four major views of the Lord's Supper. It is important to resolve these various interpretations in order to form a logical and a Biblical position. Are the body and blood of Jesus present in the elements, and if they are, in what way? The most natural understanding would seem to be to take the words and language of Jesus himself literally and not figuratively. In most cases the most plain, obvious and simple meaning of words and phrases would lead us to the correct interpretation. However, in this case, such an understanding leads to an impossible conclusion and should be rejected.

If Jesus were actually saying that His body and His blood were in two places simultaneously or that He could be many places at the same time, this would be a denial of His Incarnation. He was fully man and no human can physically be in two places at the same time. It seems clear that this is not what He was communicating to His disciples.

Jesus spoke in metaphorical and figurative terms in many instances to characterize His nature for His followers. He speaks of being "the way the truth and the life"; He says that He is "the vine" and we are the "branches"; He is the "good shepherd" and He is "the bread of life". His language at the Last Supper uses a similar figurative language. Jesus is speaking in a similar way and is trying to communicate that the bread and wine "represent" His body and blood.

The question now becomes, is Jesus figuratively or symbolically present in the bread and the wine? Many believers do, in fact, have a profound spiritual experience as they celebrate the Lord's Supper and assume an additional spiritual presence of Christ.

Essentially, this view creates a doctrine to validate an experience. One consideration of this view must be the words of Jesus Himself when He promised His followers that He would spiritually be everywhere for all time. "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20b). "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst" (Matthew 18:20). So it would seem that Jesus is always spiritually present with us, especially so as we gather as believers.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11:26, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." At Grace Church, we believe the Scripture leads us to view the Lord's Supper as a memorial, a commemoration of Christ's death. The celebration of the Lord's Supper should be seen as a thanksgiving for, and a memorial of, Christ's atoning death. We do not believe that Christ is physically or spiritually present in the actual elements of the Lord's Supper.

However, in our attempts to distance ourselves from the traditional views, it can become all too easy to go to extreme measures to say that the Lord's Supper is simply an intellectual memorial with no spiritual nourishment for us as believers. At Grace Church we believe that this ordinance was not only instituted and mandated by Jesus, but that it provides us with the opportunity

of real communion with Jesus; therefore, real spiritual nourishment can and should take place. As a community of believers, we do believe that the presence of God is with us in this celebration. We have great confidence that the Holy Spirit will truly nourish us as we participate in the Lord's Supper "in remembrance" of Christ and His sacrifice.

2. WHO CAN PARTICIPATE IN THE LORD'S SUPPER?

At Grace Church, we have an "open table". We believe that those who have a personal relationship with Christ may participate in the Lord's Supper. However, it should be reserved for only those people who are believers. Membership at Grace Church is not a requirement to celebrate the Lord's Supper with us. We only ask that you be a confessing believer in Jesus Christ if you are going to participate. You do not have to be baptized to partake in the Lord's Supper although we encourage all believers to be baptized.

Paul also warns that those who take of the Supper in an unworthy manner will suffer serious consequences (1 Corinthians 11:29-30). This warning should be considered each time we celebrate the Lord's Supper. It is also imperative that each person undergoes a sincere self-examination before participating in the Lord's Supper. Examining oneself through prayer and reflection is a step that should be taken in order to prepare the believer for the Lord's Supper.

3. HOW OFTEN SHOULD THE LORD'S SUPPER BE OBSERVED?

The New Testament is not specific on how often the Supper should be celebrated, only that it is to be a regular feature of the Christian life. Many denominations have differing views on the frequency. At Grace Church, we typically celebrate the Lord's Supper on the first Sunday of each month.

4. WHO CAN ADMINISTER THE LORD'S SUPPER?

The Scriptures are not explicit on who is able to administer the elements of the Lord's Supper. At Grace Church, we believe that all believers are equally qualified to administer the Lord's Supper. Currently, we practice communion differently at various campuses. At the Pelham campus we provide a common table and each believer is able to come to the table and take the elements of the Lord's Supper personally. At other campuses we pass the elements in a more traditional manner due to room restrictions.

5. WHAT ELEMENTS SHOULD BE USED FOR THE LORD'S SUPPER?

Jesus inaugurated the Lord's Supper during preparation for the Jewish Passover (Luke 22). Because of the rules and requirements surrounding Passover, the meal most likely consisted of unleavened bread made from year old harvested grain and fermented wine (Leviticus 23:10-14). These elements were readily available to Jesus and His disciples during this time. The easy accessibility of these substances to the masses was important in order for the table to be celebrated regularly. Today, Churches use a spectrum of breads and crackers and a variety of juices or wines highlighting the fact that the elements themselves are not the primary focus but are symbol of our Lord Jesus, the focal point of the celebration.

At Grace Church, we serve Matzah and grape juice. Matzah is unleavened bread that is striped and pierced. Throughout scripture, leaven is used to represent sin. This unleavened bread is a reminder that Jesus was "without" sin. The stripes and piercings on the bread represent Jesus' physical suffering for us on the cross as He was wounded for our transgressions. The grape juice that is served symbolizes Christ's blood, which was shed on our behalf. We have added vinegar to the grape juice in order to produce a bittersweet taste to serve as a physical reminder of the pain and beauty of Christ's sacrifice. This contrast should help us have a better understanding and more accurate reflection of the death and resurrection of Christ.

The bitterness reminds us of the bloody and gruesome crucifixion and act of torture Christ endured on our behalf, while the sweetness allows us to reflect on the result of Christ's gracious act that has restored our fellowship with the one true God. Although wine can serve to do the same, we have opted to not use an alcoholic beverage in order to be sensitive to those in the church body who may have previous or current struggles around alcohol consumption. This is just one way we attempt to remove any distractions from the local church being able to worship God through this spiritually nourishing act of remembrance.